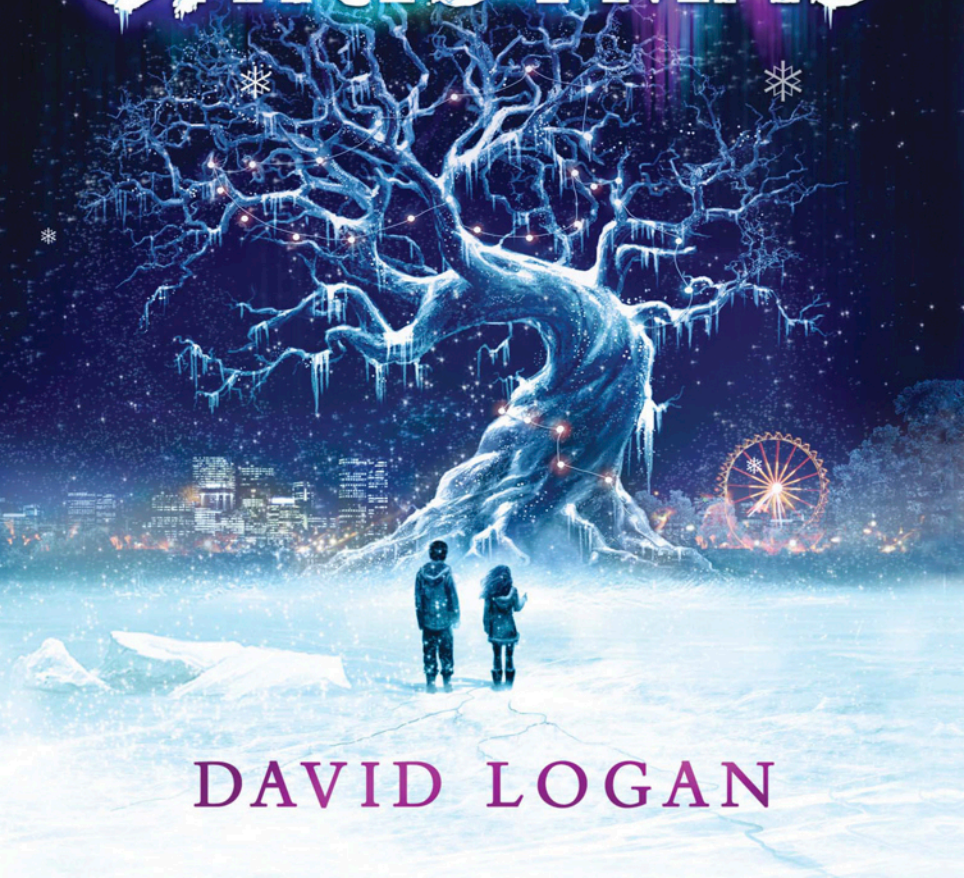


NOW A MAJOR FILM STARRING EDDIE IZZARD

LOST CHRISTMAS



DAVID LOGAN

LOST CHRISTMAS

David Logan grew up on the south coast of England. After deciding at an early age that he wanted to be a writer, he pursued a career in the film business and has been earning his living as a screenwriter for the last thirteen years. In that time he has worked for most of the major American studios. He lives in Hove, East Sussex, with his wife, Lisa; three children, Joseph, Grace and Gabriel; and his dog, Harper.

First published in 2011 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

Copyright © David Logan and John Hay

Based on a screenplay by John Hay and David Logan

The moral right of David Logan to be
identified as the author of this work has been
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,
Design and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopy, recording, or any
information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue reference for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 85738 735 6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
businesses, organizations, places and events are
either the product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or
locales is entirely coincidental.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

LOST CHRISTMAS

DAVID LOGAN

Based on a screenplay by John Hay and David Logan

Quercus

For Lisa, Joseph, Grace and Gabriel

LAST CHRISTMAS



Goose woke to the distant sound of a dog barking. It wasn't much of a bark. More of a yip. A yip that belonged to a small dog. A puppy. And not so distant. Actually . . . close. Very close. In his house close.

He heard it again, pushed himself up on one elbow and listened. His wild, all-over-the-place hair stuck out all over the place. Goose had big, green, soulful eyes. Right now they made him look cute. A few years from now they'd be the sort of eyes that made girls go weak at the knees. His mum said that to him all the time, which made him cringe.

'Girls suck!' he would say, and he meant it. His mum would smile, that all-knowing smile grown-ups have that means I know something that you don't because you're only

ten. Goose hated that smile. He hated being patronized. Most of all he hated the fact that he suspected she was right; there was something he was missing. Things were so much simpler when he was nine, he thought.

The yipping had stopped. He tilted his head to listen. A sliver of white light caught his eye as it crept in through the gap at the top of his Man City F.C. curtains. They were pale blue and spotted with the old ship and Lancashire rose emblem. His dad refused to let him update to the later eagle and stars shield. He said that the rose and the ship on the Manchester Ship Canal represented the city. What did an eagle have to do with Manchester?

Goose was an avid supporter. His walls were plastered with posters: lots of City, naturally, and *Doctor Who*. There was Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Princess Leia, Iron Man, Harry Potter and Thor. There was a stack of books and comics on his bedside table. Goose was a voracious reader. He loved books. He also loved films, football of course, swimming, dragons and computer games. He considered himself a bit of an all-rounder.

He couldn't hear anything now. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he had imagined it. Maybe it was the end of a dream. That happened sometimes, in the few short seconds between dreaming and waking when the two states merged. Goose liked dreams. He liked the idea of dreams.

Once his mum had taken him to a lucid-dreaming

workshop. Goose had asked the man running the workshop a question he couldn't answer. The man was impressed. Especially as Goose was the only child in attendance and none of the adults had thought of any question half as interesting. The man had said that it was not possible to turn a light on or off in a dream. Goose had asked if it was possible to light a match in a dream. The man had thought about it, but in the end had to admit defeat. He just didn't know.

Goose's dad had sneered at the idea of lucid dreaming. He didn't believe in all that nonsense. No, that wasn't entirely true. His dad said he was 'a healthy sceptic' – whatever that was. He didn't believe in ghosts or UFOs or God, but he wasn't arrogant enough, his dad would say, to know for sure they didn't exist. He liked to keep an open mind about such things. That open mind didn't extend to astrology, which Goose was sure had to be based in science. It did end in '-ology' after all. But his dad said it was nonsense. How could six billion people be categorized by something as random as birth date? Auntie Alice, Dad's best friend Frank's wife, really believed in astrology, and when Uncle Frank and Auntie Alice came over for dinner Dad and Alice would invariably argue the rights and wrongs of astrology. Alice would say there's so much more to it than just birth date, and Dad would say that at best astrology could group people together in very general categories that didn't take

into account environment, education or experience and therefore was about as much use as a chocolate teapot or shoes for fish.

Goose was wondering why that thought had chosen to pop into his mind at that particular moment when he heard another yip. It was definitely coming from inside the house.

He jumped out of bed to investigate, stepping straight on to a Lego model of Imperial AT-ST.

‘OOWW!’ He fell back on the bed and rubbed the sole of his foot. He looked down at his bedroom floor, which was strewn with pieces of Lego and other toys. There was a whole bunch of Transformers and *Doctor Who* figures in and around a wooden castle in the middle of the room. Several versions of the Doctor had joined forces with Optimus Prime to battle three dragons and numerous knights. Evil knights of course, who had been possessed by the spirit of Seerg the Destructor (who had taken the form of a giant gorilla). Goose had been in the midst of the final battle last night; the future of the universe rested in his hands. It was a gargantuan responsibility that many a lesser individual would have shied away from, but not him. He was up to the challenge. He was Batman, he was Aragon, he was Captain James T. Kirk and he said *BRING. IT. ON.* But then his mum had made him go to bed.

Another yip from downstairs. Goose forgot all about the game and hurried to the door, being careful to step only on safe, clear patches of carpet. He pretended he was Indiana Jones as he approaches the idol at the beginning of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, tiptoeing precisely. He reached the door and slipped out into the hallway.

Goose's real name of course wasn't Goose. It was an affectionate nickname that started at an early age and stuck. When he started to crawl, which according to his mum he did very early, he would invariably try to crawl away, to escape. When he matured into a toddler, he would toddle off at any opportunity. His parents couldn't take their eyes off him for a second. Once, when Goose was not quite two, they were at Manchester Airport, waiting to collect Frank, Alice and their daughter, Jemma, returning from two weeks in Tenerife. Goose's mum and dad turned their attention away from Goose's buggy for all of thirty seconds as they scanned the arrivals board to see if the plane had landed. In that time, Goose somehow managed to squirm out of the straps holding him in and wander away. When Mum turned back Goose had vanished into the hordes of holidaymakers. An exhaustive and frantic search of the airport followed, and eventually he was found sitting on a plane about to take off, destined for Greece. No one was quite sure how he had managed to avoid the airport's extensive security. The

Manchester Evening News had written a little article about his adventure, and his dad had joked that he had been a goose in a past life and was trying to fly south for winter. So even though he was christened Richard Michael Thornhill, he had answered to the name Goose for most of his life. And even now at the grand old age of ten, Goose rarely stayed in one place for very long. The world was big and he was hungry to see it all.

As Goose headed to the stairs, he could hear muffled voices coming from below. He passed his mum and dad's bedroom. The door was open and he could see the big bed was empty. The white duvet was turned down at both top corners and turned up at one bottom corner. Goose knew this was because Mum was always cold and Dad was always hot. They had a special duvet that was thicker on one side (Mum's) than the other. The bottom corner was turned up because Dad always slept with his feet exposed. Goose was the same. He loved those little similarities he noticed between himself and his parents.

As he trotted down the stairs, past a series of photographs of himself as an infant and three canvases that Mum had bought when he was little and made him walk across with paint-covered feet so his baby footprints walked down the wall, he could hear his parents' voices along with that of his nan. They had heard him coming and were

busily trying to hide something. Goose reached the bottom of the stairs and pushed open the door to the living room.

His mum, Linda, his dad, Paul, and his nan, Nan, turned to face him, shoulder to shoulder, forced closed-mouth smiles on their faces.

‘Awright there, Sir Gooseby?’ said his dad. Goose liked that nickname. Other times his dad called him ‘sausage’, which he really wished he wouldn’t. ‘What are you doing up so early?’

‘What’s going on? I heard barking.’

‘Barking?’ His mum was trying to sound casual. She wasn’t good at it.

‘Must’ve been outside,’ said Dad.

Just then, there was another yip, and Goose could see a dog bouncing up and down excitedly behind his parents and his grandmother.

‘Dad!’ Goose came further into the room, weaving left and right, trying to get a better look at the animal.

‘We were going to hide him till tomorrow,’ explained his mum, ‘but he doesn’t seem to want to play along with that plan. Happy Christmas, sweetheart.’

And, with that, Mum, Dad and Nan stepped aside, revealing a small brown and white mongrel deeply engrossed in a satisfying scratch behind his ear. With an open mouth Goose looked down at the dog. The dog stopped what he

was doing and looked up at Goose. Their eyes met. And it was love at first sight.

Goose dropped to his knees in front of the dog, who bounded forward, paws up on Goose's chest, licking him manically, tail wagging back and forth two hundred times a minute.

'What is he?' asked Goose.

'He's a dog,' said Dad.

'No, I mean, what breed?'

'He's a bitsa.'

'A bitsa?'

'Bitsa this, bitsa that,' Dad smiled.

Goose groaned. He should've seen that one coming.

'What you going to call him, love?' asked Nan.

Goose pondered the question as the dog bounced around him in a circle of barely contained excitement, yipping and pausing now and again to lick or sniff his new master, or scratch himself. After a moment Goose gave up and shrugged. 'Don't know yet. I'll think of something.'

Paul crouched next to his son and his new pet. The puppy lay on his back submissively and Paul tickled the dog's belly. 'There's a good boy!' He smiled at Goose. 'He's had all his shots. Wanna take him out?'

The sides of Goose's mouth strained to encapsulate his grin. His entire body thrummed with total and absolute joy. He couldn't remember a time when he'd been happier.

He felt elation coursing through him, as if it was a physical thing: a thick luminescent liquid filling him up. Even his ears felt happy. At that precise moment, the phone rang and the smile faded from Goose's face. His mum went out into the hall to answer it. His dad looked at him, still smiling, and gave a small shake of his head.

'It's awright. I'm not on call,' he said.

Just as Goose was starting to smile again, Linda came back into the room. 'Paul, it's the station. Jamie's broken a finger, had to go to A&E.' The smile on Goose's face was only just starting to reignite. It went out like a candle in a storm. Paul frowned and looked apologetic, but there was nothing he could do. He mouthed the word 'sorry', but knew it didn't help.

Goose watched as his dad stood up and strode out into the hallway. Paul took the phone from his wife and listened.

Nearby Nan was making her way along the mantelpiece, turning all the Christmas cards upside down. Goose looked at her, but the strangeness of her actions didn't register with him. His mind was elsewhere. He looked back to the hallway just as his dad glanced back at him. Then Paul turned away and sighed. 'Yeah, okay, I'll be there as soon as I can,' Goose heard him say.

He looked down at his new puppy frolicking in front of him, rolling this way and that and then getting startled by his own tail. Something silver caught his eye and he saw

a set of car keys sitting on the coffee table, at eye level, a mere arm's reach away. A dozen thoughts raced through Goose's head, all of them colliding into a jumble and not one of them making any more or less sense than any of the others. So, without thinking, his hand shot out and grabbed the keys. He pushed them under the cushion of the mauve Dralon-covered armchair behind him just as Paul came hurrying back in, clearly looking for something.

With the puppy still a non-stop ball of excitement before him, Goose watched as his dad picked up magazines from the coffee table and rooted around the mantel.

'You seen my keys anywhere, Goose?'

Goose shook his head as little as possible; somehow that made it less of a lie.

Paul stopped searching and looked at his watch. He cursed under his breath. Then he made a decision and called out: 'Linda, you're gonna have to drive me, love.'

A small barbed ball of anger lodged in Goose's throat. He clenched his lips tightly shut so he wouldn't say anything he'd regret. He breathed through his nostrils and let the bitterness mushroom inside him. *This always happens*, he thought. His dad was always working. It wasn't fair. Sometimes he hated his dad. He spoiled everything. He was so selfish.

Goose glanced down at the puppy, who had stopped spinning and was now watching Goose, his head cocked

to one side as if he could tell something was wrong. It was almost as if he could read Goose's mind, and for a moment Goose felt ashamed of the thoughts he'd had. However, that didn't change the fact that his great plan had been foiled. He watched as his mum and dad left.

Paul and Linda climbed into Linda's green Ford Focus and drove away from the cul-de-sac where they lived. Linda was driving. She turned right at the end of the street. It was still early and the roads were mostly empty. They saw the occasional milk float or delivery truck. They drove in silence for a few minutes, but both were thinking the same thing.

'I'll make it up to him,' said Paul.

'He'll be fine. He's got Ronnie to distract him.'

'Ronnie?' Paul frowned. *Who's Ronnie?*

'Ronnie Barker. Thought it was a good name for the dog. What d'you think?' Linda smiled at her husband.

He grinned. Twelve years of marriage and they still made each other laugh.

'Little out of date for Goose, isn't it? He won't have the first clue who Ronnie Barker is.'

Linda indicated to turn left.

'You should take Langford Street,' said Paul. 'It's quicker.'

'It's not going to matter much at this time, is it?' It

irritated Linda when Paul tried to tell her what to do when she was driving. They'd never had an argument about it. Linda mostly just swallowed her irritation and carried on doing what she was planning to do in the first place. Women had been doing that for centuries. It's how most marriages survived. Paul's unconscious habit of pressing his right foot down when it was time to brake was also annoying, but, seeing as he wasn't even aware he was doing it, Linda had never said anything.

'I suppose not,' said Paul. He switched on the radio. 'Wonderful Christmastime' by Tom McRae was playing. 'Oh, I haven't heard this for ages.' Paul hummed along with the song, half a second slow as always. Linda smiled.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something red. It was moving fast. Too fast for her to even turn her head. Too fast for her to form any words to say to her husband. About the same time, Paul saw it too. It was an LDV Convoy van. Red. The driver was a middle-aged man called Eric Cutty. A late night and an early start had got the better of him and he had drifted off to sleep just for a moment, his foot on the accelerator. The van shot out of the T-junction at speed. Eric jolted awake. He saw a tree ahead. He didn't have any time to react, but his mind calculated in a fraction of a second that he wouldn't hit the tree . . .

. . . because of the small green Ford Focus approaching from his left.

The van ploughed into the side of Linda's car. In the split second before impact, Paul stamped both feet down into the well of the passenger's side with as much force as he could muster. His unconscious was trying to brake, trying desperately to stop the car.

Linda did the same thing on the driver's side. The difference being that she was able to press down on the brake for real. It made no difference. The car was lifted up off the tarmac by the snub nose of the van. A kind of clarity settled in Linda's mind. She knew she was about to die and she wanted very much to kiss her little boy one more time.

'Goose . . .' she said, and then everything went black.

THIS CHRISTMAS



Mick, the landlord of the Three Witches pub, had a great sense of humour. Or at least that's what he thought. He prided himself on his entertaining quiz nights. If they weren't rolling in the aisles, he wasn't satisfied. The problem was that Mick just wasn't funny. It wasn't the material, it was the delivery. Mick would steal jokes from the best. There's an old gag by the comedian Tommy Cooper that goes, 'Apparently, one in five people in the world is Chinese. And there are five people in my family, so it must be one of them. It's either my mum or my dad or my older brother Colin or my younger brother Ho-Chau-Chou. I think it's Colin!' The problem was that Mick would always forget to name the brothers, and then when no laughs were

forthcoming for several long, excruciating seconds, he would remember his mistake and then try to explain that one brother was Chinese. Then he would remember it's saying the names that's the funny bit, but by then the joke was dead and Tommy Cooper was cringing in his grave.

Frank Lester emptied his glass and looked up at the large clock behind the bar. He struggled to focus and his tongue felt like it was coated with very small mushrooms. He definitely shouldn't have had that last whisky. Or probably the two before it. Or the first three for that matter. But, hey, it wasn't Christmas Eve every night. Technically it hadn't been Christmas Eve for the first four and a half hours Frank had been in the Witches, but now it was ten past midnight, so now it was Christmas Eve. Frank tried to say 'Merry Christmas', but it came out as 'Mirtle Kism' followed by a wet burp and he trailed off halfway through.

He slid off his stool and took a moment to steady himself while still holding on to the bar. Frank was a tall, willowy, pale man. His strawberry-blond hair was shaggy and needed both a trim and a wash. He wore a long, scruffy leather coat that had looked shabby when he bought it. Now it looked like a miracle of stitching that it was still together. But Frank loved that coat and wore it all year round.

Frank looked to the door. There was an alarming expanse of open space where there was nothing to hold

on to. Frank really didn't want to take a tumble in front of everyone. Not that there were that many of the regulars left. Just Mick the barman, old Dr Clarence, sitting in his usual spot at the end of the bar, a face like he was chewing a particularly sour wasp, his nose in a book as always, and a handful of others Frank knew well enough to nod at in the street.

'You off then, Frank?' asked Mick, coming up to swipe Frank's empty glass. He didn't give Frank a chance to answer. He said: 'Got a Christmas joke for you, to send you on your way.' Mick was laughing before he had even started.

'There's these two cats, right? One of them's called One-Two-Three and the other one's called Un-Deux-Trois. You know, like, numbers in French.'

Frank managed the smallest of nods to show that he understood and was keeping up with the gag.

'So, anyway, they have this race, right,' Mick continued. 'Which one do you think wins?' He was straining to hold back a snigger. All Frank could manage was to shrug and shake his head. Mick hit him with the punchline: 'One-Two-Three, because Un-Deux-Trois cat sank.' And, with that, a rambunctious belly laugh bubbled up out of the depths of Mick's throat. His whole body juddered with the unbridling of his mirth. Frank frowned, playing the joke over in his head. He didn't get it. 'Un-Deux-Trois cat – Oh,

wait a minute!’ said Mick, remembering a fairly integral part of the joke he had forgotten. ‘The race, it’s across a river. The cats are swimming across a river. So Un-Deux-Trois cat sank into the river. It’s brilliant, innit? French cat sank. Probably drowned.’

Mick chortled and guffawed some more, oblivious to the fact that Frank hadn’t so much as cracked a smile. After several moments, the power of articulate speech started to return to Frank. He nodded. ‘Have a good one, Mick.’

‘And you. I’ll see you tomorrow,’ said Mick. Frank took a deep breath and turned towards the door.

The freezing cold night air had a decent enough sobering effect and pretty soon Frank felt confident enough to start walking home. He buttoned up his coat, though it made absolutely no difference, and headed off down the street, weaving a little here and there.

At the end of the street Frank took a corner a little too wide, lost his footing and slipped over into the gutter. He gathered himself up and carried on, thinking about maybe singing. He could feel an almost overwhelming urge to start singing, which was strange because he was neither a man who liked to sing, even when alone in the shower, nor one who thought he could sing. Most people say they can’t sing, but deep down inside they think they have an amazing voice. Frank opened his mouth and was about to

launch into a rendition of the Oasis song 'Wonderwall' at the top of his voice when he realized he didn't know any of the words.

Frank stopped at a lamp post. He had to pee badly and this was as good a place as any. As he started, a sense of relief coursed through him.

Suddenly, he heard a *Phhrruppp!* sound and the bulb above him went out. He looked up at it and belched loudly.

Did I do that? he wondered. Then the neighbouring lamp, some ten metres away, went out too.

'Hmm,' said Frank, out loud.

A lamp across the road died. And then in quick succession, one by one, all the lamps in the street went dark. Within just a few seconds, the only light was coming from the moon.

Frank buttoned up his fly and was about to hurry on home when a cloud drifted across the face of the moon. He was plunged into complete darkness. He thought this was particularly spooky. Then he realized that there were absolutely no sounds around him. That made the spooky much worse and goose bumps prickled Frank's arms and the back of his neck. He was unnerved. So much so that he actually acknowledged to himself that he was unnerved.

I'm unnerved, he thought. It was too dark. Unnaturally dark for the city, where there was always light coming from somewhere, but Frank couldn't see any. No cars around,

not even any lit windows in the surrounding houses. It was as if Frank was completely alone. The only person in the whole of Manchester.

Then he spotted a small blinking red light on the dashboard of the parked car next to him. It was a security light, blinking to inform would-be thieves that the car was alarmed. That little red light made Frank feel a bit better and a little less alone. Someone somewhere owned this car and cared enough about it to fit it with an alarm system. Or at the very least a little blinking red light. He relaxed.

Then he looked up at the lamp post again and was now sober enough to think it odd that all the lights had gone out like they had. As he was contemplating this oddity, all the bulbs in the street came back on, all at once and much brighter than before. Ten, twenty times brighter. Frank was blinded. He cried out and covered his eyes, but it was just a little too late. As he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, he could see shapes and specks drifting past his pupils, varying shades of dark and light coruscating behind his eyelids.

The lamps dimmed, returning to their usual benign luminance, but it took the best part of a minute before Frank was able to open his eyes again. Even then, he couldn't see very much. Gradually the streaks and blobs of blurred detritus swimming in his field of vision began to dissolve and his retinas ceased to sting. Frank blinked

twenty-three times in quick succession and his eyes started to feel normal again.

He tilted his head to one side, frowned and squinted. There was a mound in the middle of the road that, he was pretty sure, hadn't been there a few moments before, prior to all the street lamps going supernova. The more he concentrated on it, the more he realized it was a human-shaped mound. Cautiously he moved towards it.

As he got closer he saw that the human-shaped mound was indeed a human. It was a man. Broad, with big features. A large jaw, a wide forehead. The man's hair was a dirty blond colour, and while he didn't have a full-blown beard, he clearly hadn't shaved for more than a week or maybe two. His beard was mostly the same colour as his hair but with wisps of red mixed in. He was dressed oddly: baggy cargo pants, frayed at the hems; heavy work boots, extremely worn; fingerless gloves on his hands and three dog collars around his right wrist. However, the reason Frank thought he was dressed oddly was mostly because of his jacket. It was a strange-looking jacket in itself, but it was the contrast between the jacket and the rest of his clothing that made it stand out. It was maroon with yellow horizontal stripes and matching yellow trim. On the left breast pocket was a badge. The badge read: 'My name is Anthony. How can I help?'

Frank edged closer, peering down at the prostrate man,

wondering if he was alive or not. He could see his chest rising and falling so he decided he was alive. Frank nudged him with his toe. 'Hey . . . mate . . .'

No response.

Frank's eyes flicked down to the name badge: 'Anthony . . . you awright?' He prodded him again, a bit harder this time. More a kick than a prod really. Still nothing. Frank crouched down, wobbling a bit, looking over him closely, his face just a few centimetres from Anthony's.

'You alive?'

Suddenly Anthony's eyes pinged open, taking Frank by surprise. He lost his already shaky balance and toppled over backwards with a cry.

Anthony sat up, blinking, and looked around. It was clear from his furrowed brow that he had no recollection of how he had got there.

'It was snowing,' said Anthony, articulating the first curious thing that occurred to him. Half a dozen other curious realizations also flitted through his mind at the same time, but the lack of snow seemed to be the one at the forefront.

Frank turned himself around and with some difficulty managed to sit up. Any talent he once possessed for balance had deserted him.

'Snow! Not in Manchester, mate,' he said. 'In Manchester it rains.'

Anthony turned to look at Frank. He wondered who he was but decided not to ask because there was the more pressing matter of that absent snow. Anthony looked up at the mostly cloudless sky. Frank looked up too.

The one cloud that had recently obscured the moon was on the move. It settled above them, and as Frank squinted up at it he caught sight of something small and white drifting down towards him. With marvellous precision, a snowflake floated down in a tight spiral and landed on the tip of Frank's nose. He crossed his eyes to try to look at it. He plucked it off and it dissolved between his fingers. He couldn't be sure what it had been.

However, before he could generate enough brain activity to formulate a question about what had landed on him, another snowflake entered his field of vision. Then another and another and then a million more. It was snowing. In Manchester. Where usually it only rained.

'What the . . . ?' Frank couldn't believe it. It was really snowing. Fast now. Collecting on the surfaces around him and on him.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, memories of Christmases past whirled and elided, moments from his childhood flashed past his mind's eye like images on the old slide projector his father had cherished. Frank remembered waking up on Christmas morning at his grandmother's little house in Kent and looking out of the

window of his bedroom to see a blanket of snow stretching out over the fields surrounding the house. He remembered the smell of her kitchen as a turkey roasted in the oven and his grandmother arranged mince pies on a plate, sneaking sips of port and thinking no one knew. She would be drunk by lunch.

The fire crackled in the living-room hearth and his big sister sprawled on the sofa watching *The Wizard of Oz*. He remembered being scared of the flying monkeys and he remembered the sing-song tinkle of the little silver bells that hung on the Christmas tree. And then suddenly he was back in Manchester, a short time after midnight on Christmas Eve. Frank shivered, but not from the cold.

‘How did you . . . ?’ Frank turned to look at Anthony, but he wasn’t beside him any more. He turned his head in time to see Anthony striding away, vanishing into a swirling, whirling wall of snow. Slowly Anthony faded from view, and Frank wasn’t sure if he had ever really been there.

A CIRCLE OF COBRAS



The wall was high but someone had dumped an old suitcase in the alleyway and Goose was able to position it in such a way that he could stand on it, though it smelled like a family of stray cats had been squatting in it until recently and Goose didn't want to find out what was inside. If he reached up as high as he could, there was still a gap of the best part of half a metre, but he was an athletic kid. He jumped and was able to snag his fingertips on the lip of the wall. Fortunately, no glass or other defences were embedded in the top and he was able to pull himself up, his feet scraping against the brickwork, the edges of his Converse finding a little purchase here and there where the dusty mortar had worn away over time.

His dog, now no longer a puppy, sat obediently below, watching his master scaling the wall. He was called Mutt. He was sleek, white and brown, and had big, expressive eyes that missed nothing. He glanced quickly left and right as if he was keeping lookout.

Goose peered over the top into the dark garden beyond. The light of the moon reflected off the snow that was lying all around and still falling. The garden was small, like all the backyards in this part of Manchester, but unlike most of them this one was lovingly maintained, with narrow pathways that traversed bushes and rockeries from which unusual statues looked out. The statues were of Hindu gods but Goose didn't know that. There were areas of lawn and gravel separated by small evergreen border hedges. He could see strings of dormant fairy lights were strung around the whole garden.

His breath clouded as he exhaled, sitting on top of the wall. He looked different. Older than the year that had passed since the crash. His wild, all-over-the-place hair was long gone. In its place was a military-style buzz cut. He had lost weight from his face and he looked sullen. He still had huge green eyes, but there was no joy behind them any more. He had nothing to be joyful about. A near-permanent frown pushed his thick eyebrows closer together.

He could see into the neighbouring yards on both sides. A large, circular trampoline dominated the one on

his left. The safety net around the trampoline was tatty and torn. The ground was littered with junk. The yard on the right was decked and there was a two-storey playhouse in one corner. Clearly children lived in both of these houses. Goose looked up at the house to his right: three windows on the first floor. He imagined one of the children waking from a bad dream and crying out, the father jumping out of bed and hurrying across the hallway, kneeling down and stroking his son's brow, pushing the hair out of his eyes and telling him to go back to sleep because everything was all right.

Goose felt weight in the pit of his stomach, as if a jagged ball of stone was expanding within him, pulling him down. He knew, for the rest of his life, there would never be anyone to comfort him like that. He tried to convince himself that he didn't need it, but the lie didn't fool him for a second. All he could do was choose not to dwell on it. Mutt yapped once, breaking Goose's train of thought and pulling him out of his brooding. The stone ball contracted once again, but it would be back sooner or later.

'Sorry, Mutt,' whispered Goose.

He looked down and could see a bench in the garden beneath him. He pushed himself off the wall and landed in an empty flower bed. The snow crunched under his feet. Crouching down, Goose observed the house. There was no movement or sign of life. He moved swiftly across the

yard to a pair of French windows and retrieved a small torch from his jacket pocket. He switched it on and shone it through the glass.

He was looking into a living room. The beam from the torch landed on a chunky, antiquated television set and a stereo. Neither was worth very much, if anything, and Goose rarely stole bulky items like that. Too heavy to carry, too hard to conceal if stopped by the coppers.

Goose was close to deciding to call it a night when the beam from his torch hit something that glinted. He stopped and moved back slowly. As the beam crossed the arm of an old worn leather chair, there was another glint of light. Goose squinted and saw a gold bangle sitting there.

Goose heard Mutt bark softly once again from the other side of the wall. He pulled an old Swiss Army knife that had once belonged to his dad out of his pocket and forced the blade into a gap by the lock. One quick, much-practised flick of his wrist and the door opened. It always shocked Goose just how easy it was to break into most houses. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The house smelled a little musty. Someone elderly lived here. For a split second Goose thought about his nan at home alone right now. He quickly pushed those thoughts out of his head and concentrated on the job at hand.

He crossed to the armchair and directed the beam of his torch on to the bangle. He picked it up and examined it

in the light. It was beautiful. It was gold. Old gold. Goose could tell the difference. There was weight to it. The bangle was in the shape of two cobras in a circle, each biting the other's tail. The detail was exquisite. Every scale on the snakes' skin had been individually outlined and the torchlight surged through the minute fissures like flowing lava.

He heard floorboards creaking upstairs. He froze and listened. He couldn't hear anyone moving. Maybe it was just someone turning over in bed.

Goose looked around. There was nothing else of value so he left, closing the door behind him.

He made his way back across the small garden. The falling snow had already filled in his footprints from earlier and he knew that soon there would be no trace of him. He climbed up on to the back of the bench and jumped towards the high back wall, got his hands on the top and pulled himself up and over.

He dropped down into the alleyway, where Mutt was waiting for him. The dog yapped. Just then they heard the sound of a car approaching and they froze. Goose stared at the mouth of the alleyway. He felt the drumming of his heart: partly from the exertion of climbing the wall and partly from the fear of being caught. The car was drawing ever closer. It was moving slowly. Goose imagined a police car, moving slowly because its occupants were looking for

someone. Maybe he had been spotted sitting on top of the wall earlier. Goose looked behind him to the other end of the alleyway. It was a long way and the alleyway was wide enough for a car to drive down. If the police chased him, he'd have no chance of escaping. The car was close now. Goose held his breath. A taxi drove past. Its tyres were slipping and sliding on the snowy tarmac, which was why it was moving slowly. Goose breathed a sigh of relief as it disappeared from view.

'Come on, Mutt,' said Goose, rising to his feet. 'It's cold. Let's go home.' He moved to the mouth of the alleyway and leaned out. He saw the tail lights of the taxi disappearing in the distance and nothing else. Goose trudged off into the night with Mutt trotting beside him.





It's a Wonderful Life meets modern
Manchester in this heartwarming
story of an orphaned boy who
meets a mysterious stranger
on Christmas Eve.

Quercus Fiction

ISBN 978-0-85738-735-6



9 780857 387356